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SERA seeks new uses for Route 35 properties Former Robert E. Lee site added to list of possible redevelopment projects BY JOLENE HART Staff Writer

Preliminary studies are under way for the redevelopment of the former Robert E. Lee restaurant site on Route 35 in Sayreville's Morgan section.

The latest redevelopment effort spearheaded by the Sayreville Economic and Redevelopment Agency (SERA) focuses on the 7 acres of waterfront property that were once home to the Robert E. Lee restaurant, but the effort may be extended to include neighboring properties.

SERA officials are also looking at an adjoining property of 2.4 acres currently owned by the borough. The borough land was once the site of a sewage treatment plant but now contains only a small sewage pumping station.

To SERA Executive Director Randy Corman, these parcels represent opportunities to bring in vital new uses that could produce revenue for the borough.

"The Robert E. Lee restaurant was a beautiful site. It was a very popular place and we'd like to make it beautiful once again," said Corman.

SERA is soliciting nearby business owners along Route 35 to see if they are interested in participating in a collective redevelopment project.

"Some existing businesses have contacted us and expressed the desire to be included in any future redevelopment area, so we decided to give all businesses along that portion of Route 35 the opportunity to be included," SERA Vice Chairman Raniero Travisano said in a press release from the redevelopment group.

Although the project remains in the early "study" phases, SERA officials are confident the effort will pan out.

"We've got a long way to go. There's a lot of work to be done, but I feel that such a great site



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can't help but ultimately succeed," Corman said.

Ideas for future use of the properties include a restaurant, marina or ferry slip, since the property borders on the Raritan Bay. State or federal money may also be available for redevelopment assistance, according to Corman.

The Robert E. Lee restaurant was a popular bayside eatery that burned down in the 1980s and has remained vacant ever since. The land containing the restaurant site was purchased in the early 1990s by Pat and Gale Lee DeRiggi of the Auwite Construction Co. in Livingston in a sheriff's sale of the Ludwig estate.

Gale Lee DeRiggi, a former Sayreville resident, expressed fond memories of the Robert E. Lee restaurant and said she purchased the property with her husband in the hopes of rebuilding on the site.

"We set out to design a beautiful restaurant. Our dream was to re-create Arthur's Landing, a restaurant and marina in Weehawkin," DeRiggi said. "This is one of the sites that you see upon entering Sayreville, and we want to make a statement with the property."

SERA hopes to submit a report on the progress of the redevelopment possibility to the Borough Council within the next three months, after assessing the responses from area businesses.

Other redevelopment agency projects in the works include plans for a power conversion plant and a sports complex. The plant, already incorporated into a borough-approved redevelopment plan, would be built and operated by Neptune Regional Transmissions Systems on part of a SERA-owned 86-acre site on River Road.

The sports complex was proposed by Global Redevelopment Corp., Newark, for the 400-acre former National Lead property. The complex would include a combination baseball stadium and arena, a hotel, convention center, retail operations and a marina with ferry service. That proposal, first presented to SERA in June, is in its preliminary stages and has not been voted on by the agency.

In February, SERA hired Corman, its first paid employee, at a salary of \$89,500 to handle the increasing workload and help to move the various projects forward.



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Developer sought for ex-Robert E. Lee site

BY MICHAEL ACKER Staff Writer

Sto usher in a new day for a long-abandoned site alongside the Raritan Bay.



COURTESY OF SAYREVILLE ECONOMIC REDEVELOPMENT AGENCY The Robert E. Lee Inn, between Route 35 and the Raritan Bay, which burned down in the 1980s, is being advertised as the potential location of a restaurant or banquet hall.

Developers who might be interested in the former Robert E. Lee restaurant property, off Route 35, are being asked to respond to the Sayreville Economic Redevelopment Agency (SERA). The agency, which recently reached agreements with nearby property owners, on Monday issued a request for a statement of interest from prospective builders.

"We want maximum publicity to seek interest for it," SERA Executive Director Randy Corman said.

The 4-acre property is between Route 35 and Raritan Bay at the mouth of Cheesequake Creek in the Morgan section.

The site was formerly home to the Robert E. Lee Inn, so named because it was located at the exit point of a tunnel that James Rufus Morgan used to smuggle gunpowder and munitions to Confederate ships during the Civil War, according to the New Jersey History's Mysteries Web site. The Web page, which cites the Sayreville Historical Society as a source, states that Morgan was a friend of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee.

The restaurant was a popular bayside eatery for many years, but was destroyed by fire in the 1980s and was never rebuilt.

Despite discussions of a new restaurant, marina or ferry slip, the property has remained vacant. Borough officials welcome the idea of a waterfront restaurant or a banquet facility there that would take advantage of the waterfront views, SERA states in its advertisement to developers.

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Earlier this year, Auwrite Construction, of Livingston, owner of 2 of the property's 4 acres, signed an agreement with SERA, which owns the other half. The agreement permits SERA to market the adjacent parcels jointly.

In addition to the 4 acres of land, the property to be redeveloped includes another 8 "riparian" acres that could be used for a marina.

Borough Councilman Dennis Grobelny, who is also a SERA commissioner, said this is the best way for both the borough and the other property owner to get the most value out of the property.

"By marketing the parcels jointly as a 4-acre tract, both the borough and the private owner of the Robert E. Lee site can both get a better price, and the people of Sayreville can get a better project," Grobelny said.

Council President Thomas Pollando praised SERA for moving forward on the potential project.

"This is great news," Pollando said. "The old Robert E. Lee restaurant was a popular place years ago, and would make an excellent site for a waterfront restaurant and marina."

Mayor Kennedy O'Brien also thanked SERA, specifically Vice Chairperson Raniero Travisano and SERA Chairperson Christine Spezzi, for starting this process with the property owner about six years ago.

"I am delighted that it is coming to fruition," O'Brien said. "...I particularly thank Renny Travisano and Christine Spezzi, who patiently pursued that which has come to pass with the property owner. It was a long process that required great patience."

Travisano said the site is at a major entrance to town for northbound travelers, and its redevelopment would "bring pride to the community."

Travisano grew up in that area.

"As a kid, he used to go swimming around there and he frequented the restaurant," Corman said.

Travisano was even one of the firefighters who fought the blaze that brought the restaurant's demise, Corman noted.

Travisano said the restaurant was a favorite hangout for him as a child and in adulthood.

"I remember when the bar was downstairs on the lower, lower level," Travisano said. "It was even with the water almost, and the bar downstairs there used to get flooded, so they moved it upstairs."

When they moved the bar upstairs, many patrons would sit and enjoy the view of the bay and the creek, he recalled.

"It was just great. We just had a lot of fun there," Trivisano said.

Patrons of the restaurant came by boat and car from all over New Jersey and New York.

"They served the greatest seafood and steaks," Trivisano said. "You could enjoy a good meal, the good company. We would come in with our boats, dock right on the creek, go in and eat."

Trivisano recalled fighting the fire with the Morgan Hose & Chemical Co., and how ice became a problem in the freezing February temperatures.

"It was early morning and it was very cold," he said.

Trivisano hopes to see much of the Route 35 corridor in Morgan redeveloped, "so that we can put a lot of life in that section." He said it is encouraging to see restaurants such as the Spanish Riviera doing business there.

"Hopefully, the Krome property will be redeveloped," Trivisano said, referring to the defunct nightclub where a senior community called Bayview Marina is proposed. The plan calls for 144 housing units and a marina on the 10-acre site at the corner of Route 35 and Olde Spye Road.

"If we can develop that whole area ... that would be fantastic," Trivisano said. "It would bring a lot of life to the area of Morgan and Route 35."

The agency's request for statements of interest can be found on the borough Web site. The due date for responses is Oct. 30 at 2 p.m. Respondents can call Corman for more information at (732) 390-7010